

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 003748

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: CUD "LITE" PROTEST ENDS IN GOE CRACK DOWN, HIGH-LEVEL ARRESTS AND AT LEAST 11 DEATHS

REF: ADDIS ABABA 3713

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶11. Summary: (C) At least 11 people were killed, reportedly including two policemen, and a similar number injured when riots broke out in the central Mercato and Piazza districts after the CUDP called for a series of street actions. Rock-throwing youth and security forces squared off in a number of locations in these districts. Police arrested CUDP president Hailu Shawel, mayor-elect Berhanu Nega and other party leaders, in addition to what appeared to be hundreds of demonstrators. MFA director for North America Grum Abay charged that the CUDP had orchestrated the street violence, busing in outsiders to provoke Mercato residents. A number of other sources indicated that arrests of horn-honking CUDP sympathizers sparked spontaneous reactions from students and others in Mercato. A CUDP spokesman denied to PolEcon Counselor that the CUDP had planned any violent acts and promised to reiterate a call for non-violence in a radio message Nov. 1. The CUDP official (who was arrested a short time later) also said that the party's campaign of civil disobedience would continue. A subsequent CUDP statement called for a general strike beginning Nov. 2. The streets of Addis had quieted somewhat by late afternoon on November 1, but a significant possibility of continued violence exists. The CUDP and GOE have thus moved away from dialogue and back towards a confrontation whose future course is hard to predict. End Summary.

CUDP Launches Civil Disobedience Campaign

¶12. (C) After more than a week of hesitation, the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) unveiled on October 30 its new strategy of civil disobedience designed to apply popular pressure on the GOE to negotiate the CUDP's full eight-point agenda on democratization. The strategy called on the public to undertake a graduated series of measures, which would include:

- 1) a commercial boycott of the numerous businesses owned and operated by the ruling Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF); these companies include a bank, brewery, cement factory, printing press and assorted others.
- 2) An advertising and consumer boycott of all government electronic media;
- 3) a stay-at-home strike for one week beginning either November 7 or 14, depending on the end of Ramadan;
- 4) Social ostracization of individuals believed to be cooperating in EPRDF "domination" efforts. The CUD specifies that this measure does not apply to all EPRDF supporters, nor by implication to all Tigrayans.
- 5) Open public gatherings to be specified later;
- 6) Cooperation to prevent "the illegitimate use of force" on opposition members by security forces;
- 7) Notify NGOs, embassies and human rights organizations about the "unlawful acts" of the GOE;
- 8) Honking car horns during rush hour the week beginning Oct. 31 in order to send a signal to visiting African Union heads of state;

¶13. (C) The CUDP leadership adopted these measures amidst a tightening security noose around the party's main offices in Addis Ababa. Police and plain clothes security forces surrounded the offices beginning on Friday, October 28 and remained throughout the weekend. CUDP officials told embiffs that at least a dozen party officials were rounded up in the area around the offices, but security forces refrained from arresting any well-known CUDP leaders. Security forces did pull one local-hire British employee from the vehicle of the British DCM in the vicinity of the offices, however, and released her only after the personal intervention of British Ambassador Bob Dewar. Two Dutch diplomats at the scene were also taken briefly into police custody. CUDP leaders issued a call for supporters to gather around the offices to protect party officials from security forces, which led to more

arrests and crowd control efforts. CUDP first vice president Bertukan Mideksa told Pol/Econ Counselor Oct. 31 that nearly all those arrested over the weekend had been released after a few hours, though at least three CUDP members had been beaten while in custody. Meanwhile, the state media denied reports that arrests had taken place at the CUDP headquarters. No serious injuries were reported, but tensions ran high in the area over the weekend. Another manifestation of increased tensions was the series of police checkpoints established around Addis Ababa at key intersections on October 30.

Horn-Honking Leads to Rock-Throwing and Repression

14. (C) On October 31, the first day of the CUDP's horn-honking protest, the GOE reportedly responded by arresting somewhere between 30 and 200 drivers from both taxis and private vehicles for "instigating violence." News of these arrests was disseminated through both state media and private, opposition-oriented newspapers. On November 1, reports suggest that additional arrests of drivers in the central Mercato area prompted a popular reaction. Some accounts suggest that arrests outside a large high school prompted students to come out on the street and confront police. Grum Abay, the MFA's director for European and North American Affairs, told the Charge that afternoon that the CUDP had bused its own activists into the Mercato area to incite the protests. CUDP Director of International Affairs Yacoub Hailemariam separately denied to Pol/Econ Counselor that the party had organized any rock-throwing or street actions. He insisted that the party's public messages had emphasized non-violence, and had called only for horn-honking.

15. (C) Charge and PolEcon Counselor surveyed the Mercato and Piazza areas at midday and saw ample evidence of widespread street battles. Many streets were littered with rocks that had apparently been thrown at police and nearly all shops in both areas were shuttered. Taxis and other vehicles had vacated the area, but large numbers of people continued to roam about and gather in small groups. Make-shift barricades impeded traffic and some small fires were burning. Tension was palpable but police appeared to have restored order in all areas. Large numbers of police moved about in trucks and on foot, some wearing riot gear. Others blocked off certain areas. Emboffs also observed several police trucks carrying water cannon. Groups of police were also rounding up groups of demonstrators and transporting them in flat-bed trucks. A number of ambulances raced around the area. One group reported to PolEcon Counselor that large numbers of people had been arrested, and others beaten.

16. (C) Post's security investigators confirmed with one local hospital that eleven individuals had been killed in the disturbances and another 11 injured. Wire reports placed the number dead at five. A former GOE cabinet official told the Charge late on Nov. 1 that two of the dead were policemen. Post will continue to gather information on casualties.

GOE Arrests Top CUD Leadership

17. (C) Several sources reported that at 4:00 pm local time, security forces arrested senior CUDP leaders, including President Hailu Shawel, Addis Ababa mayor-elect Berhanu Nega, public affairs director Gizachew Shiferaw and Yacoub Hailemariam. Other leaders may also have been taken into custody. Post had no word on where they had been taken or what charges would be filed against them. (Note: Senior GOE officials have warned repeatedly that they have "piles of evidence" against party leaders and were prepared to act on it if street demonstrations took place. CUDP leaders had been anticipating that they might be arrested, and discussed the possibility several times with Charge and other emboffs in recent weeks. End note.) Instructions for civil disobedience that the party issued over the weekend indicated that if the arrests occurred, the CUDP campaign would move immediately to a stay-at-home strike. The party issued a public statement to this effect late on Nov. 1, calling for capital residents to stay at home beginning Nov. 2 for an indefinite period.

18. (C) Prior to the actual arrests of opposition leaders, MFA official Grum had told the Charge during their November 1 meeting that the GOE might finally round up senior CUDP leaders in the wake of the protests. The Charge urged continued restraint by the GOE, and argued that high-level arrests might trigger more protests. Grum expressed skepticism that popular reaction would be significant.

¶9. (C) Prior to the onset of demonstration and arrests, the CUDP also continued to struggle on the legal front. After expelling vice president Lidetu Ayalew from the party for refusing to turn in his previous party's (EDUP-Medhin) registration certificate along with the CUDP's official merger documents to the National Electoral Board (NEB), the coalition formally requested NEB approval for its merger on October 28. The NEB responded by stating publicly that the CUDP should cancel any public events or actions until its application for official party status had been approved, and reiterated that the party had not legal standing to organize activities until its application had been approved. Lidetu told Post his refusal to relinquish his previous party's registration stemmed in part from his concern that the NEB would use the CUDP's transitional status against its leaders when they were arrested (see ref A). PM Meles and other EPRDF leaders have made clear that they intended to ban the CUDP and charge its leaders with treason if they pursued street action against the GOE.

Comment: A Predictable Tragedy, An Unpredictable Future

¶10. (C) Post and other members of the Ambassadors Donors Group have argued to CUDP leaders for weeks that in the current climate, even a non-violent public demonstration was likely to spiral out of control and lead to unnecessary deaths. That prediction came true on November 1. The CUDP's stated purpose for its campaign was to force the GOE to give more ground in its negotiation on further democratizing Ethiopia's institutions, especially the National Electoral Board. The MFA's Grum Abay told us today, however, that the time for such negotiations had now passed.

¶11. (C) Today's killings and arrests may persuade remaining CUDP leaders and the public to step back from the brink of broader violence, or may plunge Ethiopia even deeper into crisis. The CUDP leadership's decision to forego Parliament and pursue its agenda through popular protests implied that the party would be willing to withstand arrests and repression along the way, however. The GOE can be expected to deal with continued street action decisively. Post will work with other donor embassies to urge GOE restraint and an end to provocative actions by the CUDP. We will also seek to pick up the pieces of the lapsed political dialogue we promoted several weeks ago.

HUDDLESTON